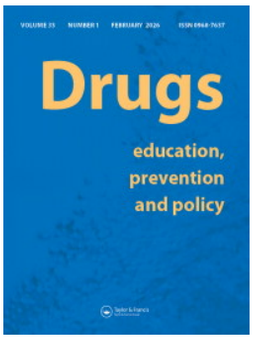

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Managing competition in hybrid drug markets: How Snapchat mediates opportunities and risks for drug dealers' practices

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ABSTRACT

Background: Social media platforms have come to play a key role in facilitating retail-level drug sales. While much existing research has focused on how digital technologies shape seller-customer relations, this article draws on a postphenomenological approach to explore how the affordances of digital technologies mediate and re-organize drug dealers' interactions with competing dealers.

Methods: This article is based on in-depth digitally facilitated oral interviews with 25 individuals with experience of dealing drugs via social media platforms.

Results: Snapchat mediates new forms of visibility and surveillance, enabling sellers to monitor local competitors' prices, products, and market activity. For many, these practices become routine, contributing to competitive price adjustments. While Snapchat creates new strategic opportunities, including the possibility to carry out scams and robberies, it also generates vulnerabilities, such as heightened exposure to rival dealers and the risk of falling victim to these same tactics. In response, dealers adopt various mitigation tactics, such as strategic self-censorship, customer screening via in-app data, remote logouts, and multi-account setups.

Conclusion: Snapchat mediates both opportunities and vulnerabilities in drug sellers' inter-dealer relations. This study highlights the analytic value of postphenomenology in understanding how digital technologies condition sellers' competitive practices and the balance between visibility and risk.

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Introduction

Like most capitalist arenas, illicit drug markets are rarely characterized by monopolies but rather by varying degrees of competition between a multitude of smaller and larger drug sellers (Desroches, 2007). Much research has documented the complexity of drug sellers' relationship with competitors in offline market contexts. These relations can range from violent attempts to eradicate competitors (Goldstein, 1985; Reuter, 2009; Topalli et al., 2002), to peaceful collaboration (Coomber & Maher, 2006; Dickinson & Wright, 2015; Søgaard et al., 2019; Tzvetkova et al., 2016; VanNostrand & Tewksbury, 1999). More commonly, however, sellers seek to increase or maintain market shares through various marketing strategies. These include price reductions or discounts (Levitt & Venkatesh, 2000; Moeller & Sandberg, 2019), the offering of quality or 'branded' products (Goldstein et al., 1984; Wendel & Curtis, 2000), or providing added customer services (Søgaard & Salinas, 2025). While recent studies have described how the increased digitalization of drug markets has expanded drug sellers' ability to market their illicit products to customers (e.g. Bakken, 2021; Bakken et al., 2023; Demant et al., 2019; Demant & Bakken, 2019; McCulloch & Furlong, 2019; Moyle et al., 2019), there remains a need for more in-depth understandings of how the affordances of digital technologies mediate and re-organize drug dealers' strategic interactions with competitors.

In recent years, social media platforms have come to play a key role in facilitating retail-level drug sales. As noted by Childs and Bernot (2024), this development has resulted in efforts to better conceptualize drug sellers' relation to digital technologies. Informed by insights from Science and Technology Studies, and concepts like 'affordances', 'technosocial networks' and 'assemblages', recent studies have showed that digital technologies are not merely instruments utilized to supplement or extended drug sellers' intentions and marketing capabilities. Digital technologies are also generative of dealers' agency and behavior (ibid.; Childs et al., 2020). Bakken

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et al. (2023), for instance, describe how the rise of social media-based markets has heightened the visibility of competitors' sales strategies while also making it easier for buyers to switch suppliers. In these highly competitive digital environments, many drug sellers now engage in what Childs and Bernot terms 'platformed mediated labor' (2024, p. 159) to attract customers. This includes drug sellers using platform-facilitated opportunities to post texts, pictures, videos, often including colorful graphics, GIFs, emojies and music, as a means of capturing the attention of potential customers (e.g. Demant et al., 2019; McCulloch & Furlong, 2019; Moyle et al., 2019). Dealers also draw on digital capital and platform-facilitated opportunities to construct 'online personas' that projects an image of professionalism, civility and trustworthiness (Bakken, 2021; Bakken et al., 2023; Bakken & Harder, 2022).

Relatedly, studies have also explored how digital affordances influence the sellers' posting behaviors across platforms (Aagesen & Demant, 2025; Demant et al., 2019; Demant & Aagesen, 2022; Haupt et al., 2022). The concept of affordance first emerged from the work of Gibson (1977) and proposes that opportunities for actions are afforded by objects and/or (digital) environments. While digital technologies increasingly condition the possibilities and limits for drug exchanges, not all digital platforms share the same features or structure behavior in the same way (Childs et al., 2020). By use of a platform-sensitive approach to affordances, Haupt et al. (2022), for instance, show how social media platforms with affordances for longer messages had a higher variety of drug type mentions in post. Lastly, researchers have analyzed what Childs and Bernot denote as the 'datafication of drug markets' (2024, p. 152), referring to a process where drug exchanges between market participants are increasingly rendered into digital data. This can involve adopting platform logics to surveil drug exchanges, for example, when drug customers post and share information about specific drug sellers in forums on social media drug sales platforms, hence incentivizing higher levels of service among sellers (Bakken et al., 2023). Datafication also refers to algorithmic processes. Demant and Aagesen (2022), for instance, describe how social media algorithms can potentially point individuals, who showed an online interest in drugs, or 'befriended' drug sellers online, to other similar products or sellers, hence unintendedly increasing access to drug suppliers. Childs and Bernot (2024) similarly found that Facebook's recommendation directs persons, who participated in drug sales groups to other similar groups.

While recent studies have taken important steps in exploring how the materiality of technologies configure change in illicit drug markets with a particular focus on seller-customer-relations, this article contributes to this literature by investigating how digital mediations shape inter-dealer relationships. Existing research shows that drug market competition between sellers entails strategic marketing, price adjustments and risk management (e.g., Dickinson & Wright, 2015; Moeller & Sandberg, 2019; Topalli et al., 2002; Tzvetkova et al., 2016; Wendel & Curtis, 2000). However, the growing influence of social media platforms introduces new dynamics and digitally mediated opportunities that reshape how competition is managed. What happens to these classic themes in drug market research when social media enters the equation? Examining these questions and shifting attention to inter-dealer relations, this article contributes to advancing our understanding of how sellers adapt their practices and how competitive market dynamics evolve in digital contexts. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 25 dealers, selling drugs via Snapchat in Denmark, the article applies a postphenomenological lens to explore how Snapchat's platform mediates and shapes drug dealers' agency and relations to other dealers, including their attempts to gain a competitive advantage and mitigate risks and threats from other dealers.

Theoretical framework

To develop an in-depth understanding of the co-producing role that social media technology plays in shaping drug dealers' competitive behavior, we draw analytical inspiration from postphenomenology, which has recently gained increased traction in criminology (see e.g. Wood et al., 2023).

Rosenberger and Verbeek (2015) describe postphenomenology as an approach useful to examine human-technology-world relations and to understand the roles that technologies play in the relations between humans and world, including the impact technologies have on human behavior and experience. Rather than seeing technologies as merely functional and instrumental objects that can be utilized to express or extend the intensions and capabilities of individuals, a postphenomenological approach focuses on technological 'mediation', including technologies' ability to influence and shape a person's perceptions, experiences, choices and actions (ibid.). Technologies mediate human behavior through 'affordances' (what a technology allows its users to do), and by 'inviting' certain actions (what technology encourages users to do), while inhibiting others (Verbeek, 2005). The notions of 'mediation'

and 'invitation' are crucial because they capture how technologies can become generative by creating and shaping a space for choices, action and experiences. Relatedly, Rosenberger (2010) also explain how technologies shape individuals 'field composition', that is, their 'field of awareness' and perceptions of the world. Importantly, however, according to postphenomenology, technologies do not 'invite' only one (or the most obvious) type of action/perspective. Rather, any technology is characterized by 'multistability', meaning that it is open to manipulation and interpretation, and can be put to multiple (and also unintended) purposes. A technology's capacity to 'invite' certain actions is hence always contingent upon an actor's existing interests and the context in which it is embedded (Rosenberger 2010; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015). Crucially, however, the notion of multi*stability* simultaneously points to the fact that no technology can mean everything or be put to all usage. Rather a technology's material constraints as well as its embeddedness in specific relations, means that only a certain variety of meanings and usage will prove stable over time. For any multi-stable technology, it is hence possible to identify certain (techno-)stabilities (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015). When a certain techno-stability is repeatedly enacted over time it can undergo a process of 'sedimentation', meaning that a certain purposive usage of a particular technology becomes entrenched in habits and routines (Rosenberger 2010).

In the analysis, we use this approach, emphasizing technological mediation, to explore how Snapchat, and the underlying algorithm, renders competing dealers hyper-visual to each other; how this digitally mediated visibility is generative of new modes of competitive 'platformed mediated labor' (Childs & Bernot, 2024), as well as of new vulnerabilities and precautionary measures to avoid victimization. Prior studies suggest that drug dealing facilitated by social media, is characterized by ongoing hybridity of offline and online processes (Korshøj and Søgaard 2024; Childs & Bernot, 2024). Relatedly, we show how the technological mediations of drug dealers' competitive relations are shaped by and unfold in a blended reality.

Snapchat and the Danish context

Snapchat is a social media messaging app that allows users to send photos or videos, known as' Snaps', to their followers or 'Friends'. Users can share content through 'Stories', which are collections of Snaps, visible to followers for 24 hours. A unique feature of Stories is that the senders can see which followers have seen their content. Snapchat also includes a messaging feature that allows users to chat, with messages disappearing by default unless saved by the sender or receiver. A defining aspect of Snapchat is its emphasis on privacy and control over shared content, as messages and Snaps disappear after being viewed by default, and senders are notified if recipients take screenshots of either the chat, Snaps or Stories. The platform also include features like the 'Snapscore', a numerical value reflecting user's activity, and the 'Search Function', which allows users to find other accounts and groups typing in usernames, topics, or keywords (Snapchat n.d).

Snapchats community guidelines prohibits the use of Snapchat for any illegal activity, including promoting, facilitating, or participating in criminal activity, such as buying, selling, or exchanging illegal drugs (Snapchat, 2025a). Despite this, in Denmark, the first media reports on Snapchat being used to deal illicit drugs emerged in 2018. The police quickly declared Snapchat as a 'new, anonymous and a fast showcase for criminals' (Fuglsang & Helms, 2018) and described combating these trends as 'a constant race between law enforcement and the criminals' (Jensen, 2018). Despite police efforts, and Snapchats designers intended non-criminal use of the platform, Snapchat remains widely used by drug dealers in Denmark, and the technology's role in facilitating illicit drug trading continues to attract media attention (Hemmer-Hansen, 2024; Hildebrandt, 2024; Østergaard, 2024; Sonne, 2023).

Method and data

All data collected and coded was done by the first author (NTK). The data consists of 25 in-depth digitally facilitated oral interviews with 23 males and 2 females, all experienced in dealing drugs via different, and sometimes multiple, social media platforms and encrypted messaging apps. Participants were recruited both on- and offline. Offline, posters were distributed at a local university, several high-schools, technical colleges and drug treatment centers across the country. Online, sellers were directly contacted through Snapchat, Reddit, Telegram and Wickr, and adverts for the project were posted on two large Danish Subreddits. The criterium for participating were previous or current experience with dealing drugs via social media. Consent was gathered through a link to an online consent form, where participants could choose an alias to protect their anonymity. All participants were aged between 16 and 30, while one participant was 52 (median age 22.8), and all were offered gift vouchers of 150 DKK (15 accepted). All interviews were

semi-structured and conducted orally. 24 of the 25 interviews took place online (one being physical), via either Zoom, Wickr, Signal, Discord or Snapchat, utilizing these platforms' videochat or call features. The participants could choose which platform they felt most comfortable using, and whether they wanted their cameras turned on or not. Most decided not to. Utilizing these online platforms for interviewing provided enhanced anonymity for participants, concealing both their locations and, for some, their physical appearances. Additionally, this method created greater flexibility for both the participants and the interviewer in terms of the 'place' of the interview (see e.g. Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Sipes et al., 2022). The interviews lasted between 30 minutes to 2.5 hours (average 1.5 hours). All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Given the sensitive nature of the study, ethical considerations were required. Scholars have illustrated how conducting research in online spaces raises specific ethical challenges (Franzke et al., 2020; Roberts, 2015), particularly when recruiting and interviewing populations that engage in illegal activities (Barratt & Maddox, 2016; Ferguson, 2017; Kaufmann & Tzanetakis, 2020). This research informed this study, where several steps were taken to balance feasibility with ethical responsibility. To gain access to groups and seller accounts, NTK created a research profile and employed a non-intrusive 'lurking approach' (Ferguson, 2017 p. 689), observing without participating in interactions until directly contacting sellers for interviews. To protect potential participants from risks of exposure, including being labeled as 'snitches' by other drug sellers, all direct recruitment of participants was done by private messages, rather than commenting on the sellers' public post. As an added measure to protect participants from legal repercussions, voice recordings from interviews and contact information were deleted after transcription, with identifying details such as names and places altered before transcripts were stored. To protect the researcher's safety while at same the time ensuring transparency, NTK used a consistent pseudonym, related to her institutional affiliation and initials, across all platforms. When contacting potential participants directly or by recruitment adverts on Reddit, the project's purpose was clearly stated, with a link to a university webpage containing information about the project and a picture of the researcher. Permission from subreddit administrators was obtained prior to posting recruitment adverts, which ensured that recruitment efforts abided to community norms.

Snapchat was actively used by 20 out of 25 participants, while the remaining five had knowledge of its use for drug sales through friends or acquaintances. The analysis and examples presented in the article draw exclusively on participants with direct first-hand experience, while the accounts of the last 5 were used as background. The 20 participants, who had actively used Snapchat to sell drugs, sold a variety and often multiple substances. The most reported drugs sold were cannabis (17) often together with cocaine (10), followed by amphetamines (5), MDMA (4), benzodiazepines (4), LSD (4), mushrooms (2), opiates (3), ketamine (1), 2-CB (1), and opioids (1).

The interview guide was designed to explore several aspects related to the participants' drug dealing: how they got started, their motivations for selling, their modus operandi, how they sourced drugs, and if (and how) they recruited helpers and employees. Also, the participants were asked to reflect upon their choice of platform(s), their marketings strategies, screening of customers, and how they dealt with competition from other drug sellers, and the risks of getting caught by the police. The interview guide also included questions about the participants' broader lives, their offline (drug) crimes and about the connections (and contrasts) between their on- and offline criminal activities. All interview data was coded using NVivo14. The first phase of coding resembled what Braun et al. (2019) describe as 'codebook thematic analysis' (p. 849), where data was initially coded into broad semantic domain summaries guided by the interview guide such as: 'getting started', 'daily work', 'sourcing drugs', 'employees', 'technology', 'competition', 'recruiting customers', 'police', 'getting caught', 'social life', with different subcodes underneath. In total, 17 codes and 68 subcodes were created. Under the code 'competition', 8 subcodes were created: 'protection offline', 'protection online', 'co-operation/helping out', 'looking out/staying updated', 'conquering areas', 'hacking/stealing phones', 'violence, threats, robbery scams', and 'debt'. The second phase was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analytical framework, where the subcode 'Snapchat' from 'technology' and all subcodes under 'competition' were re-read. Following a deductive approach, the further coding and analysis were guided by the postphenomenological approach, which acted as a lens to explore human–technology–world relations and technology-mediated opportunities. The analysis took an exploratory approach aiming to describe and explain participants' practices, while the postphenomenological lens shaped how the data were re-read and interpreted, resulting in the themes described in this article.

The project was registered with the Danish Data Protection Agency and follows the ethical standards required by the Danish Social Sciences. ChatGPT 4o

were used to assist with checking grammar, reducing redundancy and long sentences. All quotes have been translated from Danish to English by the first author. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article.

Results

Overview of local competitors

Snapchat's visual and algorithmic features mediate opportunities for dealers to advertise their products, showcase availability, and maintain a presence in local drug markets. Similar to findings from other studies (Bakken, 2021; Demant et al., 2019; McCulloch & Furlong, 2019; Moyle et al., 2019), we also found that sellers used these features to post visual adverts showcasing their offerings, prices, and delivery times, helping them stay visible and competitive.

Importantly, much like Snapchat's algorithm points drug customers, who uses the app to search for drugs, to potential new sellers in their local area (Demant & Aagesen, 2022), the algorithm also points drug sellers, who posted drug adverts, to other drug sellers. This algorithmic recommendation system has enabled a new practice, where most of the drug sellers in this study had started to monitor and 'follow' local competitors on Snapchat. While some participants continued to rely on word-of-mouth to get knowledge about who was selling in their local area, the majority described how they used Snapchat to get an overview of local competitors. They described how they would use the search function to type in well-known codewords for drugs or dealers, zip codes or area names, to 'look up' other local dealers (see also Korshøj & Søgaard, 2024). Interviews showed that drug sellers monitor competitors for a variety of reasons, including getting insights into competitors' products offerings, prices, opening hours, which areas they delivered drugs in, and to get inspiration on how to construct appealing drug adverts. Sellers used this information to strengthen their competitive position. For example, if they saw that competitors closed their business at 22:00, some would extend their own business hours until midnight in the hope of attracting 'nighthawk' customers. As we will demonstrate in the following, some also monitored competitors to ensure they were competitive in terms of prices.

Responses to local market price fluctuations

Like legal capitalist markets, illegal drug markets are also characterized by fluctuating commodity prices (Caulkins & Reuter, 1998). While price fluctuations are sometimes caused by structural shifts in demand and supply, research also shows that individual dealers occasionally lower their prices or operate with price discounts as a means of increasing their market share (Moeller & Sandberg, 2019). To stay competitive, local dealers thus need to have some knowledge of the sales prices of competitors and to adjust their prices accordingly.

Snapchats features, enabling drug sellers to search and follow other dealers, combined with the open way many advertise their products, make it easy for individual sellers to get insight into competitors' prices and to respond to price fluctuations. The participant Emil (21 y/o), who sold cocaine, explained how he and his associate, when cruising around the city delivering drugs to customers, would monitor competitors' prices, and adjust their prices in real-time:

> **Emil**: We had our private Snapchats, where we followed everyone else who were dealing. So, we could see what the prices were […] You don't want to be at the bottom, and you don't want to be at the top either. So, you put yourself neatly in the middle.
>
> **Interviewer:** So, you simply keep an eye on the market?
>
> **Emil:** Yes, yes. Every day, every day. All the time actually. So, my friend who was sitting in the back of the car, if he could see that 'okay, now it is 700 DKK for a gram for the rest of evening for three other dealers' – then we did the same. Then we just made an update on our Story on Snapchat [stating] 'Hey, it's snowing [slang for cocaine] a lot tonight, the price is now 700 DKK per gram and 400 DKK for a half'. So, we kept an eye on the market all the time. I think everyone did.

Snapchat thus mediate drug sellers' 'field of awareness' (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015). Much like a pair of binoculars fills a user's field of awareness with the content brought forth by the device (ibid.), so too does Snapchat. The technology shape drug sellers' awareness by being a 'lens', or a 'window' (see e.g. Wellner, 2011), gaining virtual access to the local drug market, through which they can get insights into the competitors' current drug price range, and adjust their own prices to stay competitive.

Price-monitoring as habitual practices

Just like Emil, in the above, many participants described how they would monitor competitors' prices on a daily basis. This suggests a 'high sedimentation' (Rosenberger 2010), meaning that interacting with Snapchat as a monitoring tool, has become part of sellers' habitual routine and an essential part of their drug dealing

business – a necessary element of staying current, just like Laura (24), who sold cannabis, explained:

> If you don't know what's going on [in the market], and you're just running your own show, then, if all of a sudden, the others [competing sellers] have gone in five different directions, then it's not you who's attractive anymore.

This usage illustrates the multi-stable character of Snapchat. For the dealers, this means that Snapchat not only mediates opportunities to advertise their products and communicate with their customers, but the mediated visibility of competing dealers and affordances of the app also make it possible for them to monitor the competition, adjust prices and collect information. Frederik (28), who sold cannabis and amphetamines, even described how '*Snapchat has almost been like my personal PriceRunner*'. It should be noted that unlike legal and digitally facilitated systematic price-comparison sites, such as PriceRunner, the price comparisons enabled by Snapchat and done by drug dealers is at best partial. Sellers must manually search for and monitor competitor accounts, limited to those they already know of or follow, which can provide only an incomplete overview of the market, since other sellers may remain outside their view. Further, the process is often unsystematic in frequency, and their price comparisons rely on memory and rough estimates of average levels, rather than systematic data collection and calculations. However, participants' metaphorical reference to PriceRunner does indicate how integral and essential the use of Snapchat has become for these drug sellers in setting competitive prices.

For the dealers, using Snapchat in this manner, are likely learned behavior, developed through repeated interactions with the platform, that allows them to use it for a variety of purposes. Dealers do not just react to information passively; they actively seek out and interpret it in a way that helps them navigate and manipulate the market; Where drug customers might just see colorful and flashy commercials from different sellers, the dealers see useful information that can strategically be deployed by them to gain a competitive edge. While Snapchat mediate the possibility of scouting dealers across wider geographies, the sellers' practices remain deeply rooted in their local environments. Dealers primarily monitored the prices of nearby competitors, as these are most relevant for maintaining their market position. Their actions are not isolated to the digital sphere but are also shaped by the offline realities of competition and territory. In densely populated or high-competition areas, real-time price adjustments become critical, prompting constant monitoring of local sellers. In contrast, dealers operating in low-competition rural areas described less frequent need for price adjustments.

Opportunities to 'conquer' the competition

While robberies have long been a feature of drug markets (see e.g. Jacobs et al., 2000; Topalli et al., 2002), Snapchat's visibility and searchability now mediate new ways of tracking, contacting, and luring competitors into fake transactions disguised as legitimate meetups. These features add another layer of accessibility and exposure that changes the way scams are carried out and managed. The following account by Omar (24), who sold cannabis and cocaine, illustrates how Snapchat mediate opportunities to engage in more aggressive tactics. Omar explained why he and his associates followed competitors on Snapchat:

> **Interviewer:** You mentioned that you also [followed] your competitors Snapchat?
>
> **Omar:** There are many reasons for it. First of all, we want to keep up with what they're selling, what products they have, and the prices they're running with, so we stay competitive. But also, because if there's a chance that we could steal their sales-phone, then there's a lot of money to be made from it. A lot of new customers, right? So, it was also to keep an eye on them. There have also been times when we've had the opportunity to take their phone, and so we've done it. You can see a pretty quick boost in your earnings from that.

Victor (22), who sold cannabis, amphetamine, cocaine and benzodiazepines, explained that once a target was selected, setting up these meetings was done easily by either creating a new Snapchat account or by paying a customer to use their preexisting profile on Snapchat:

> You do it by writing to them [the competitors], that you have seen or received their snap [account]. I often write that I have gotten their Snapchat from a friend, and that I need some cocaine or cannabis, or whatever they were selling. And there aren't many people who asks: 'Who was it from?' Many of them just accept your request and ask where to meet up.

Meetings were then set up using the Snapchat app under the guise of conducting a normal money-for-drug transaction, but with the intent of robbing or in attempts to forcibly shutting down other businesses, with either threats of or by use of violence. Creating new Snapchat accounts can be done rather quickly, and unlike other social media platforms, does not need to be authenticated, making it easy for sellers to be anonymous and hide their real identity. For sellers, it

can thus be a swift process to create a new profile, search for competitors in their local area and to pose as a potential new customer to lure them into an ambush.

As outlined by prior research (Søgaard et al., 2019), in technologically mediated local drug markets, the drug sales-phone, and more specifically the SIM card or the social media account, today function as the contact point for a diverse network of customers. In these markets, SIM cards, and now also social media accounts, containing a portfolio of customers, have therefore become objects of theft for dealers eager to take over competitors' customer networks (see Søgaard, 2020). Similarly, we found that stealing competitors' Snapchat-based list of customers, was also a key aim when (trying) to rob competing dealers. However, it is worth noting that in larger businesses, one individual, sometimes referred to as a 'central' (see also Søgaard, 2020), typically manages the sales-phone from a secure location, and then informs the delivery personnel on where to deliver drugs to customers. This setup reduces the risk of the entire operation being compromised if a phone is stolen, as such incidents primarily intimidate delivery personnel and cause temporary disruptions rather than a complete shutdown. In smaller operations, however, the dealer often carries the 'main sales-phone' to customer meetings, making them more vulnerable to theft and shutdowns.

For the sellers in our study, Snapchat thus mediates more than just opportunities for monitoring competitions, for adjusting prices and getting a competitive edge, it also facilitates opportunities for 'takeovers'. These dealers shift their awareness toward locating competitors and seizing possibilities for actions like robberies or market expansion, rather than just price monitoring.

Mediated visibility: A double-edged sword

While the above demonstrates how Snapchat facilitated opportunities can function to empower dealers, by enabling them to engage in different novel and strategic practices, the use of Snapchat can, however, also leave drug sellers vulnerable. Johan (17) who sold cannabis, amphetamines, mushrooms, benzodiazepines, MDMA and LSD, reflected on the changing nature of drug dealing, noting how technologies like Snapchat have reshaped the marketplace:

> Back in the day, when there were no technologies and people just bought their drugs from a dealer they knew personally, they just kept quiet about it. But now, dealers are really easy to find – you just have to find them online. So, you [as a dealer] are basically exposed to all the other dealers.

While discussing the visibility and the mediated opportunities that arises from using Snapchat, Johan further expressed how:

> It's both an advantage and a disadvantage for everyone. It's an advantage that you can do it to others, but it's also a disadvantage that others can do it to you.

Johan's observations encapsulate a complex duality. While Snapchat enables dealers to proactively monitor competitors for various purposes, it also has implications for their own security, as the technology can also be used against them. While many sellers embraced the opportunity to gather information by scouting their competitors, several also emphasized the importance of staying vigilant when using Snapchat. Snapchat's technological features, for instance, allow senders to see who has viewed their posts. When using Snapchat to monitor other dealers, there is thus a risk that the observing dealer will be noticed or identified by the observed sellers. Laura (24), for instance, recounted how she was inadvertently exposed when a competitor recognized her private Snapchat account among the people who had viewed his advertisement Stories, to which she reflected on her own security:

> You also have to make sure that people don't know that you're watching them, you know? In other words, it is easy for people to remain anonymous via SMS, but on Snapchat you can see who has seen your Stories. […] So, you have to be careful too.

Knowing that competitors might be watching, just like they themselves did, some sellers described how they limited what they shared 'openly' through Stories or Snaps when advertising for their businesses. This awareness of being visible to others through the platform created a kind of strategic self-censorship, as the possibility of being monitored, shaped how some sellers presented themselves and their operations. Like other participants, Frederik (28) explained that he did not display 'menus' of his products through Stories or Snaps:

> It provides too much information, I'd say. Like, if I… Let's say I posted that I had both ecstasy, coke, amphetamines, and ketamine, just to give an example. Then anyone would be able to assess how big my business is and how significant I would be [in the market]. Or how much money there would possibly be involved… or how big a competitor I am, or something like that. So, it's simply easier to just keep it [details about his business] closed off [and private].

By restricting what he put on display, Frederik attempted to limit some of the potential risks, such as being labeled a significant 'player' by the competition, that they would possibly like to shut down or rob. By

keeping one's cards close to one's chest, the sellers would try to remain secure and in control versus being on display and at risk. Similarly, others chose to limit the information on their Stories to simple announcements about opening hours, keeping all details on products and prices private in one-on-one chats with customers.

Mediated risk mitigation

In addition to limiting information shared on Stories, many dealers also adopted screening measures to mitigate risks from competitors. One factor that seemed to heighten the risk of unwanted encounters, as the participant Victor noted, was neglecting to try to 'screen' one's customers. Asking customers where they found one's account, or requiring vouches from trusted contacts, was thus a common practice for the majority of the participants, a security measure also seen within closed offline markets (May & Hough, 2004), that has continued into the digital spheres (see e.g., Bakken & Demant, 2019; van der Sanden et al., 2022). Similar to the findings of Demant and Nexø (2024), participants also described assessing the legitimacy of potential new customers by their way of communicating, such as paying attention to style of writing and reply time. However, some participants further described using information found *within* the Snapchat app itself when trying to assess people who contacted them online. When users create an account and interact with the app, data is produced in various ways (Snapchat, 2025b). On a Snapchat profile, this process of 'datafication' (Childs & Bernot, 2024, p. 153) includes, for example, the profiles' creation date and Snapscore, both of which become visible to others once a friend request is accepted. Some sellers used this online information to evaluate the legitimacy of the person behind the username. Frederik (28) explained:

> [The Snapscore] is a good indicator for [determining] if it's a sincere teenager who has spent 1000 of hours maintaining their social streak with friends, or if it's a totally new profile.

Similarly, Laura (24) noted:

> […] if I could see that it was someone who had just created a profile quickly, and I could just see on their Snapscore were like, only 5, then it's a bit suspicious.

The data created within the app thus mediates opportunities for the sellers to make evaluations on whether an account seemed trustworthy. This illustrates another multistability of Snapchat, this time as a source of information used by sellers to assess whether a new customer poses a potential risk or not. Several participants explained how they believed that legitimate customers tend to use older profiles with higher Snapscores, why newly created and/or low-scoring profiles were suspicious and could potentially be competitors (or the police). The dealers' ability to 'read' the information from the profiles reflects a specific understanding of how to use the platform as a safety measure, not just for customer interactions and advertisement, but also as a safeguard for screening potential threats, where features and data from the app itself become part of evaluating risks.

Another example of how the app itself could mediate protection emerged when participants described how one way to reduce the risk of having their 'customer lists' stolen by competitors, was by remotely logging out of their Snapchat account if their sales-phone was stolen. Anna (27) who sold cannabis and oxycontin explained:

> Let's say there's a courier and they get mugged. That's annoying, but then it's just all about shutting down the Snapchat account. The person who created it still has the code and everything for the account, you know. So, it's just about shutting it down as quickly as possible. So, you go in and do that, 'log out of all devices' or something like that. And then just make sure it's logged out, so you can reopen it again from your own phone or the new phone.

Snapchat thus mediate an extra layer of security for their businesses. Sellers can be signed into the same account across multiple devices, and so, in the event of a sales-phone being stolen, sellers can easily manage their accounts and log off the compromised device remotely. This specific feature thus helps dealers to safeguard and maintain their business continuity, provided that they manage to log out and regain control of the account, before the password is changed by the other party.

Finally, a subset of highly risk-conscious sellers described how creating multiple Snapchat accounts was another way to mitigate risks from competitors. They explained how they would initially create Snapchat accounts with easily searchable drug-related names, including different codewords for the drugs they would sell and area or zip codes, to quickly attract customers. Later, once they felt they had reached a comfortable number of customers to sustain their business, they would then create new and anonymous, non-drug-worded, non-searchable accounts, with ordinary Danish names, to hide from public view that they were indeed selling drugs, and sometimes on a larger scale. They would then migrate all their screened and vetted customers to this new account, while keeping openly shared information (e.g., Stories, 'menus',

pictures) to a minimum. This would, in their words, minimize the risk of both being monitored by their competitors and the possibility of being unwillingly contacted, while they simultaneously could follow the other dealers from their own private accounts. This suggests a deliberate tradeoff, where some dealers prioritized risk mitigation over income maximization, settling for what they considered a decent income, once a customer base was established. However, even after changing to conventional, non-searchable names, accounts could still be circulated through word-of-mouth, allowing sellers to gain new customers indirectly, though without the same level of open exposure. Kristian (20), who sold cannabis and cocaine, even described how him and his associates, in the attempt to hide the size of their business and to avoid attracting unwanted attention from competitors, operated three different Snapchat-accounts with different (and non-similar) names, where they also ensured to post differently formatted drug commercials, to disguise that they were the same persons operating the three accounts. Creating multiple accounts on Snapchat for the same business can thus also be a multifaceted strategy of getting a competitive edge, without risking unwanted attention from competitors.

Discussion

As noted by Childs and Bernot (2024), one key way of advancing our understanding of the role of digital technologies in drug sales, is to be clearer about what theoretical perspectives we apply to technology. In this paper, we have applied a postphenomenological lens, which foregrounds the role of technology as an active mediator. Unlike instrumental perspectives that view technology as a neutral tool for executing pre-defined user goals, postphenomenology understands technology as an active mediator that shapes human agency and practices. Postphenomenology emphasizes that technology creates spaces for actions, and technologies are viewed as multistable, mediating different opportunities. While prior studies of social media facilitated drug trading have predominantly focused on the role of such technologies in seller-customer relations (Bakken, 2021; Bakken et al., 2023; Demant et al., 2019; Demant & Bakken, 2019; McCulloch & Furlong, 2019; Moyle et al., 2019), in this study we focused on seller-seller relations, including how Snapchat mediates new opportunities and risks in drug sellers' strategic interactions with competitors.

More specifically, we found that Snapchat, and the underlying algorithm, renders competing dealers hypervisual to each other, and generates new opportunities for them in trying to achieve a competitive edge. This includes dealers integrating Snapchat into their business strategies, not merely for communication or advertising, but as a resource that enables them to surveil and gather information about competitors, their marketing techniques, opening hours, products and prices. As we showed, some sellers use this information to adjust their own prices to attract potential customers. These strategic uses of the platform exemplify how drug sellers embrace and exploit the diverse, mediated opportunities that Snapchat offers. Snapchat's multistability also becomes apparent in that the digitally mediated visibility of drug market actors brings both advantages and risks. While the increased visibility on the one hand facilitates new opportunities for strategic competition, on the other it also engenders a situation where some drug dealers feel visible and exposed as they themselves can potentially be monitored by competitors. When dealers use Snapchat they thus have to weigh the pros and cons and balance the tradeoff between visibility and risk. To counteract the Snapchat facilitated risks, sellers adopt different risk mitigation strategies. These include minimizing what they share and post on their stories, using the Snapscore to gage the legitimacy of buyers, remote logouts, or anonymous multi-account setups. These embedded affordances illustrate how technology is co-constitutive of sellers' practices. Ultimately, visibility on Snapchat becomes a double-edge sword, a balancing act between exposure and precaution, competitiveness and personal security, and between being an asset and a liability.

The practices of collecting information, adjusting prices, and robbing competitors are not new phenomena within drug markets (Levitt & Venkatesh, 2000; Moeller & Sandberg, 2019; Topalli et al., 2002). Our study, however, provided insights into how the growing societal permeation of social media technologies, such as Snapchat, adds novel dimensions to these activities, configuring changes that contribute to a reshaping of illegal exchanges and markets. More broadly, our article thus contributes to an understanding of what Childs and Bernot (2024) have termed the platformisation of illicit drug markets, that is a general process of societal practices adapting to and being shaped by digital platforms. As noted by Childs and Bernot (ibid.), however, the process of platformisation is not uniformly distributed across geography, technologies or different drug market contexts. Our study has focused on generative features of Snapchat and on drug dealers operating in a Danish context, but there remains a need for studies of how drug sellers' agency and competitive behavior

is shaped by alternative digital infrastructures and by the socio-cultural logics of different types of drug markets. In addition to other social media platforms, this could also include A.I, which some have predicted will come to have a growing role in drug trading (Weisheit, 2025). Our findings also point to the value of exploring more closely how drug sellers themselves interpret and navigate these platformed environments, not only through surface-level online observations but also through in-depth engagement with their lived experiences. Future research could build on this by further exploring seller–seller relations, and by combining digital observation with interviews or other qualitative methods that capture the human side of how technologies are used and experienced in practice. We hold that a postphenomenological perspective and the concept of affordances are useful in this project as it emphasizes how technologies mediate practices and how 'action possibilities' are not inherent to technologies but rather emerge through interactions between people, technologies and specific settings.

Limitations

The findings are based on a relatively small sample ($n = 25$) and rely on participants' self-reported experiences and knowledge of using Snapchat for illicit drug dealing. While this study provides valuable knowledge into how Snapchat mediates competition management and drug dealing practices in a Danish context, the localized nature of drug markets means that these findings may not generalize to other geographical settings. Additionally, while the postphenomenological framework emphasizes human-technology-world relations, it may not fully account for broader socio-economic or cultural factors that also shape drug markets and influence dealers' decisions. Despite these limitations, we hope to have provided meaningful novel insight into how Snapchat influences competition management and drug market dynamics, fostering a deeper understanding of the intersection between technology, drug dealing, and the merging of on- and offline spheres, and encouraging further research in this area.

Conclusion

Drawing on postphenomenological theory and qualitative interviews with Danish drug sellers, the article showed how Snapchat's affordances shape drug sellers' strategic interactions with competitors, including management of visibility, price monitoring, risk mitigation, and for some, even aggression. While Snapchat opens up new possibilities, it also introduces new risks. Our findings point to the multistabilities of the platform and illustrate how sellers' choices are influenced not just by technology itself, but also by offline dynamics. By focusing on dealer–dealer relations, the study offers insight into a less studied dimension of social media facilitated drug markets, which has hitherto tended to focus on dealer-customer relations. It also underscores the analytic value of replacing instrumental views of technology with that of a perspective on technological mediation, as means of exploring how novel digital technologies conditions and shapes drug dealers' agency and practices.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethics statement

The project has been registered with the Danish Data Protection Agency and follows the ethical standards required by the Danish Social Sciences.

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